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ABSTRACT

Classroom observation of four student teachers during the first, seventh, and fourteenth weeks of their teaching semester focused on their management of transition periods between lesson segments. Videotapes and stimulated recall analysis of the differences revealed that: (1) the most effective student teachers averaged fewer transitions per lesson; (2) the less effective teachers' transitions were more than three times the duration of their more effective counterparts; (3) the more effective teachers devoted less overall class time to switching activities; and (4) effective student teachers had no behavioral problems requiring desists during their transitions while the less effective teachers averaged 3.3 desists per transition. Suggestion are made for making transition periods more efficient. (JD)

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TRANSITION MANAGEMENT: THE STUDENT TEACHER'S ACHILLES HEEL

Paper presented to the
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"Transition Management: The Student Teacher's Achilles Heel"

A typical class period consists of a number of instructional units, or segments, which are joined together by brief transitory phases known as transitions. In addition, most periods include an opening session before the call to order and a closing session between the final lesson segment and student dismissal. Teachers attempt to begin each lesson quickly and try to move smoothly from one lesson segment to the next, ending the session on time with objectives having been achieved.

In planning the lesson, teachers not only must decide how much time to devote to each content and what kinds of activities to plan for students, but must also decide how many activities to plan for students, how long each activity should last, how to sequence the activities, and whether to schedule activities simultaneously or sequentially in time.

One result of having a sequence of activity segments is that each time one segment ends and another is about to begin, some time needs to be spent by the teacher to dissolve the first setting and to create the next one. It is during this transition time that materials get distributed or put away, pupils and teachers may move to new locations, instructions are given and behavioral expectations often change.

Transitions are usually easy to recognize. For example, the teacher might say "Okay, close your text books; open your workbook to page 32, exercise C." This might be repeated once more as students focus on the change of activity.

One researcher (Smith, 1985) found that transitional phases are fundamentally different from instructional phases and require different behavior from the teacher. He agrees with other researchers that the

teacher's managerial competence will be especially tested during transitions.

Another investigator (Arlin, 1979) found that for five groups of student teachers there was significantly more off-task disruptive behaviors from pupils during transition time than during non-transition times. The off-task behavior during transition time was almost twice that of regular classroom time. This pattern was observed in spite of the fact that off-task behavior, to be classified as such, generally had to be more pronounced during transition. Off-task behaviors were rather definite, such as hitting, yelling, or making obscene gestures.

It is generally recognized that transitions can be indicators of time management problems during other class time (Arlin, 1979; Smith, 1985). If transitions are lengthy, chaotic, and lack smoothness, it is likely that many other factors related to time management are problematic as well. For this reason transitions may be an efficiently observable indicator of the general level of on-task and off-task behavior in a classroom.

It has been suggested by several researchers that the timing of transitions is primarily determined by the teacher's use of steering criterion groups. Arlin and Westbury (1976), Dahloff (1971) and Lundgren (1977) found that teachers used a "steering criterion group" consisting of pupils near the twenty fifth percentile in deciding when to change topics.

In my experience with student teachers, I have discovered that they do not seem to be consciously aware of using steering groups. However, they may be implicitly using certain pupils who serve as clues to the interest, restlessness or comprehension or the whole class. While these student teachers are unable to identify particular pupils who were influential in the timing of transitions, they were generally aware of being influenced by smiles, questions, frowns, or quizzical looks.

A number of investigators have suggested that a less effective teacher has more disruptive transitions than a more effective teacher (Gump, 1967; Kounin, Friesen and Norton, 1966). This writer found this to be true also for student teachers. Least effective student teachers not only have more disruptive transitions, but have more disruptive instructional segments as well.

Research also indicates that smooth transitions can be attained by the teacher's use of clear verbal and nonverbal signals to mark the boundaries or transitions (Doyle, 1983). Smooth transitions are (1) prepared for in advance; (2) they are usually started and ended by the teacher's clear signals; (3) instructions are given in logical order; (4) the teacher waits for the instructions to be carried out before continuing on to the next segment of work; and (5) the teacher remains task-oriented and does not allow students to sidetrack (Smith, 1985).

In the fall of 1987 this writer studied the transition managment of two student teachers designated by pupil ratings and university supervisor ratings as most effective and two student teachers designated as least effective. The instrument used was Classroom Teacher Inventory (CTI) (Brooks, 1977). Student teachers were rated on fifteen teacher presage characteristics and nine instructional behaviors.

All four student teachers were videotaped during the first, seventh, and fourteenth weeks of their teaching semester. Stimulated recall analysis of the videotapes suggested differences in the management of transitions between lesson segments. The most effective student teachers (teacher eleven and teacher thirteen) averaged fewer transitions per lesson than the least effective student teachers (teacher nine and teacher fourteen). The average number of transitions for the effective student teachers during a

fifty-five minute lesson was 3.6 transitions (table one) compared to 4.3 transitions for the less effective student teachers (table two).

The average time spent on transitions was very different for the two sets of student teachers. Effective student teachers required only an average 13.6 seconds for a transition (table one), while the less effective student teachers required an average of 42.2 seconds for a transition (table two). This means that the less effective student teachers' transitions were more than three times the duration of their more effective counterparts.

The much longer time required for transitions by less effective student teachers also meant that a greater proportion of the overall class time was devoted to switching activities. Less effective student teachers spent nearly six percent of toal class time in managing transitions (table two). Effective student teachers required less than two percent of total class time for their transitions.

Finally, probably because they were so swift and organized in managing transitions, effective student teachers had absolutely no behavioral problems requiring desists during their transitions. On the other hand, less effective student teachers averaged 3.3 desists per transition. Multiplying this figure times the average number of transitions (4.3, table one) we can see that less effective student teachers had fourteen behavioral problems requiring desists during their transition management in a typical classroom period.

This is why this writer has called transition management the "achilles heel" of the student teacher. It is at this time, while changing activities, that they are most vulnerable and confused. They allow themselves to be sidetracked by students who wish to slow the lesson down. They over-react to "squeaky wheel" students who present problems that are extraneous to the material being presented. They "flip flop" back to

material in the previous segment which they have forgotten to cover. In general they seem to lack purpose and a sense of time urgency. Students sense this and seize on transitions as "time off" from the lesson.

What can be done about this problem? First, student teachers must recognize that transitions can be a real problem. They need to know that time difficulties during transition invariably represents deficiency in overall time management. And, finally, they need to become aware that research findings offer some real help for them. From research they can learn of the necessity to prepare in advance for transitions, to give clear signals for the beginning and ending transitions, to give clear instructions in a logical order, and to convey a sense of time urgency to students. And one last word of advise to student teachers - always plan more than you can accomplish.

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TABLE 1

EFFECTIVE TEACHERS USE OF TRANSITIONS

TRANSITIONS	TEACHER 11	TEACHER 13	AVG. TEACHERS 11,13
Average Number of Transitions	3.6	3.6	3.6
Average Time of Transitions	20.6"	6.6"	13.6"
% of Total Time In Transition	.028	.008	.018
Average No. Desists of Transition	0	0	0

TABLE 2

LESS EFFECTIVE TEACHRES USE OF TRANSITIONS

TRANSITIONS	TEACHER 9	TEACHER 14	AVG. TEACHERS 9, 14
Average Number of Transitions	3.6	5.0	4.3
Average Time of Transitions	52.6"	31.8"	42.2"
% of Total Time In Transition	.068	.051	.059
Average No. Desists of Transitions	2.3	4.3	3.3